

On the Right Track

How one man discovered it's never too late to pursue the American Dream

By Mitch Moore

History shows that many inventors simply stumbled upon their big ideas. In Gary Balser's case, the metaphor was a little *too* real.

In January 2005, Balser was stowing some boxes away in the attic of his Florida home when he lost his precarious foothold on one of the narrow truss boards. By the time he was able to toss the boxes aside and grab onto something for support, his foot had slid to the truss, through the insulation and down against the ceiling.

He managed to pull himself free and crawled back to the attic entrance, where he took a few moments to catch his breath. He was there just long enough to catch a little inspiration as well.

"The same thing had happened to me twice before, and I was thinking that there had to be an easier way to get organized in the attic," Balser recalls.

His solution was to design a platform for storage items that could easily be rolled back and forth on a metal track, allowing the homeowner access without having to fully enter the attic. The platform would be large enough and the track long enough to accommodate even large-capacity storage needs. It would also be totally portable and easy for homeowners to install themselves.

He dubbed his invention "Attic Trac plus", a complete storage and retrieval system, and promptly applied for a patent. But it took a change in his circumstances before the venture gained momentum.

An executive with 42 years of experience in the manufacturing operations and marketing fields, Balser moved to East Tennessee that April to prepare for his retirement. Just five months later, the home office of ClosetMaid informed him that he was once again needed in Florida.

"By that time, I had received my patent, and I just wasn't willing to move back again," he says. At 57, he retired from the corporate world to pursue his dream. "I give a lot of credit to my wife. She knew I wouldn't be able to just sit around. That would have driven her nuts. I had the patent, and she encouraged me to move forward with it."

With plenty of time on his hands to focus on manufacturing and marketing his product, Balser started his own company, Lofty Vision, LLC, in January 2006. After four months and countless trips to his local home improvement store, he had developed a prototype for the Attic Trac plus.

The rest of the year was spent researching his competition, testing his prototype, developing business and marketing plans and setting up a manufacturing facility in nearby Madisonville, Tennessee. Although he had spent more than four decades in structured corporate environments, Balser was confident in flying solo.

“I was at peace about it. Based on my experiences at the retail and manufacturing levels, I had no fear in taking the product to market,” he says, adding that his faith also helped bolster his confidence. “I sort of used the ‘Gideon process’, thinking that I would set the fleece out, and if it was wet, I would move forward.”

Evidently, the fleece came back soaked. Attic Trac plus units began rolling off the assembly line earlier this year, and Balser is currently marketing his brainchild through his Web site, www.attictrac.com, and a nationwide network of dealers.

These days, Balser is busier than ever, but as he approaches age 60, pursuing a businessman’s dream is a much more enticing prospect than a life of full-time leisure.

“When I retired, I thought, ‘What am I going to do with the rest of my life?’ I can only play so much golf and shuffleboard. I wasn’t ready to hit the rocking chair yet.”